

14/1/09 Philippians 2:12-3:11 midweekchurch Philippians 2a (mid)

When I was growing up in Sydney, I had little time for art. I had seen in my first few years that I had no aptitude at all for painting, or drawing. I had no idea of shape, of balance, even of colour. Rarely did anyone ever figure out what it was that I was attempting to draw. Besides, going to an all boys state school, anyone interested in art or music was considered a pansy. Thus I threw myself into sport, and put all my recreational energies in that direction.

But I found that when I went backpacking overseas, I became intrigued by art. Here I was in the most famous of cities, in world renowned art galleries, looking at paintings by the masters. And suddenly it didn't seem all that sissy after all. The thing that impressed me about the artist, was that they were able to communicate so much in just a picture. As they say, a picture is worth a thousand words.

It amazed me how a good artist could communicate not just a person's outward appearance but what was inside - their hopes, their joys, their personality. And portraits like that stand the test of time. So I felt that I was looking into the eyes of people who were alive, despite the fact that both the artist and the subject were long dead.

In some ways I feel the apostle Paul is an artist. For in the middle part of his epistle to the Church at Philippi, he paints some portraits, four in fact. But he doesn't paint them on a canvas but with words. He draws four portraits for us of people that are around him.

So let's walk down the gallery that Paul has assembled. Let's look hard at the portraits and learn the lessons that Paul would teach us. For sometimes an artist's work will have a common theme & Paul tells us that his four portraits do indeed have a common theme. They are showing us how four people work out their salvation. For he encourages the Philippians "*to work out their salvation with fear and trembling*".

For the Christian life is hard work. Sure it's easy to get started. All we have to do is admit our sins before God, ask for forgiveness and say you want to follow him from now on. It's that easy. But once you have started you soon realise that the implications of what you have done, are far reaching, in fact they affect every part of your life. So you must work hard at it.

But you work at it with God's help, because not only do we continue to work out our salvation with fear and trembling, but we realise it is *God who works in us to will and act according to his good purpose*. God is the one who is doing the real work. So our work is opening ourselves up to let God's Spirit do the real work inside us. For it is He that will make the lasting changes to our lives. It is He that can achieve something praiseworthy in you and I.

Knowing all this Paul has called his collection "*Working out your salvation*". For as he tells us in the guide accompanying the pictures, the way we live should *shine out like stars in the universe*.

There is nothing prettier to me than camping out in the bush, away from the noise of the city and the city lights, where you can see the full majesty of the stars. And here Paul is looking at the people around him and realising that they too shine like stars. But it's important that we give off the right light as well as a bright light.

1. Timothy So the first piece in the collection is what I've called a charcoal sketch of Timothy. It is a charcoal sketch because he doesn't go into much detail. He just draws a couple of lines, a few strokes of charcoal, but it gives us enough to see what Timothy was like. The charcoal sketch places Timothy in the centre of the picture, with a few indescribable figures in the background. He does this because Paul feels *there is no one like Timothy*, all the others fade into the background in comparison.

But what is so good about Timothy? And how is he working out his salvation? Well from the charcoal sketch it is obvious that he has a genuine interest in the welfare of others. He is a living example of what we looked at in the early part of chapter 2, the Christian who in humility puts others better than himself.

That is the one characteristic that Paul paints into his portrait of Timothy. So I wonder if Paul was painting me, would he say the same? If he was painting you would he paint you in such a way that it was obvious that you put others before yourself? Unfortunately for many of us, he wouldn't do that, for in the next sentence he says that the Timothy's of this world are few and far between. "*For everyone else just looks after their own interests.*"

These people around Timothy in the picture are Christians but Christians who have stopped working out their salvation. Who have become selfish, too attached to their material possessions, their comforts and so have stopped working out their salvation with fear and trembling.

But there is one other interesting thing about this portrait, Timothy is no spring chicken even though he has a young face. For Timothy has proved himself in the work of the gospel, he has calloused hands so to speak, and on those hands are the marks of the one who has experience. His is a portrait to inspire. He is one who is like a captain coach, who leads by example, and asks us to follow him. For there is still so much to do in the work of the gospel. Timothy is one example, a good example of someone working out their salvation. And Paul has painted him, to encourage you and I to follow Him, to put others better than ourselves and to continue to serve our Lord Jesus.

2. Epaphroditus. Yet then our eyes moves on to the next portrait in the collection. It is a more detailed picture, with bright colours replacing the charcoal grey. It is a picture of Ephraoditus, a picture of a man who is close to death. A man who is lying on his bed with the doctor leaning over him shaking his head, there is nothing that can be done for him, for he is close to the end.

Yet this is not a pitiful figure, who has given up. This is one who, despite his illness, despite his condition, is still working out his salvation. He is still helping others. For we see that he is reaching out to those who are well, and is ministering to *them*. Whereas others should be attending to his needs, here we see a picture of a sick man attending other people in their needs. He is risking his life, to give others help.

Yet as we narrow in on Ephraoditus we see something strange. He's in full military uniform. Despite his illness, he is soldering on. Despite his sickness, he is still involved in the battle. He has the belt of truth around his waist, the breastplate of righteousness in place, the shield of faith, with a few of the enemies arrows in it, is still on his arm, and in his hand there is a sword which on its blade has the words the Spirit of God.

Here is a man who is still working out his salvation, even though he is obviously near to death. Here is a man who is risking his life for others. He knows that Jesus gave his life for his salvation, and so if he must give his life for others, then so be it. So Paul paints this picture to inspire us to join Epaphroditus in the fight. To follow him over the trenches and to remind us that we are all in the midst of the battle. And it's time that we again joined the fray & got involved in that battle right up until the last day of our lives.

3. The evil men. Yet when we go onto the next portrait, the bright colours give way to a dark oil painting, a bit like one of the old Dutch Masters. For the subject material is now dark. The tone is now sombre, for here before us we have an example of people working out their salvation in the wrong way, in a way that will not get them to heaven.

Paul describes the people in the picture as evil men, as dogs, as those who mutilate the flesh. It is the last phrase which points out to us who these people really are. They are people who were part of what was known as the Circumcision Party. Who believed that to work out your salvation, you had to do something more than just accept what Jesus had done for you. I've called them the Christ + Party. For working out your salvation for them meant doing more and more things for God to make you acceptable to God.

For one figure has in his hand a circumcision knife, which he was telling others that we could not receive God's promises unless they were circumcised, as it was Christ + Circumcision. Another was kneeling in a river encouraging those who passed to be baptised, as if you needed to believe and be baptised, it was Christ + Baptism. Another was taking Communion, as if it was Christ + Communion. Yet another was doing a huge amount of washing up as if it was Christ + Helping People.

Here the Apostle had painted people who were saying that believing in Jesus, receiving forgiveness from Jesus is just not good enough. You have to do more. You have to go and prove yourself to God, make yourself good enough for him, by doing more and more things. This is especially important painting for today, for there are many people who take Christ and love to add things to what he has done.

There are some JW's who say you need Christ but you must also door-knock to be saved. There are some in the Mormons who say you need Jesus plus be part of their Church to be right with God. There are some Pentecostals who say you need Christ plus the baptism of the Holy Spirit, its Jesus plus speaking in tongues. There are some in the Catholic Church who believe you need Christ plus you need to have regularly received all the sacraments to be saved. There are some in the Presbyterian Church who believe you need to have Christ + living a good life to be saved.

Yet in the corner of the picture, small and insignificant compared to all the other people in the painting, is a man on the Cross. Just behind him we see the setting sun, and the last glimpses of light fall on this man. It is the thief on the Cross, with a smile on his face. He is about to die, he hasn't been baptised or spoken in tongues, or lived a good life, or ever had communion. Do you know what? He isn't even a Presbyterian! But he is just about to slip into heaven.

For although he has none of these pluses, he has said to Jesus "*Remember me, when you come in power*" and he has heard Jesus say "*today, you will be with me in paradise.*" The artist has

shown in this painting in the style of a Dutch Master, that it is Christ and Christ alone who works in us, for our salvation.

4. Self-Portrait of Paul Now there is only one more picture in the collection, a self portrait by the Apostle Paul. Here we see a man with the marks of suffering on his body. Who has just rags on as clothing, who needs a good meal, who is dirty, and who is chained to a brick wall. It's a fascinating portrait, because quite simply he is ugly. And behind the man's back is a pile of bright, dazzling, attractive items.

There is his Pharisaical gown, bright and impressive. There is his birth certificate which we can see states that he is a Jew, of the tribe of Benjamin, the tribe that gave Israel their first ever king, King Saul. There are his letters from the highest religious court in the land, giving him permission to act as a judge to condemn the Christians, permission even to kill. There is a scroll with the law on it, and a tick against every law, showing what a good life he had lived.

But these items are not on a shelf like a trophy cabinet, they are scattered around a garbage bin. For the Apostle sees that they are like rubbish. A life time of impressive achievements thrown away, because they were not able to get him to where he wanted to go, to God. They were good in themselves, but they had to be discarded, left to rot, because as our eye moves across this picture we see that this figure, this Paul, is facing another man, a man with scars on his hands, and on his feet. It is Jesus.

And we see this ugly man clinging onto Jesus feet, with a smile of contentment. For he knows this Jesus. He loves this Jesus. He is completely satisfied in this man's presence. For he has gained what he was after, righteousness, a right standing with God. Not through his birth, his nationality, his good works, his zeal, his involvement in the Church. Not because he has helped others, or soldiered on till the very end. Not through anything he has done, but through a faith, a belief, a trust in what Christ has done for him.

We have come to the end of the portraits. We have seen the charcoal sketch of Timothy and been inspired to follow him. We have seen the detailed drawing of Epaphroditus and been encouraged to hang in there to the end. We have seen the Christ + Party and have been determined not to go down that path, and we have been startled by the self portrait of the Apostle Paul where he gains all his energy from Jesus.

But as we turn to leave the collection, we notice that there is a blank canvas, near the door, with a frame leaning against the wall. And on the frame is a plaque with a title "*Working out my Salvation*" and with our name as the artist. There are paints, and oils, and crayons there to use, and we realise it is now our turn to draw our own self portrait.

How will we do it? How are we working out our salvation? Are we putting in the effort? Is there a fear of God involved? Are we trembling, putting everything we have, all our desire and passion into what we are doing? Or are we just flicking a bit of paint towards the canvas when we have a few spare moments in the midst of a busy day?

Are we trying to do all the work ourselves? Rushing from here to there, tied up in our actions, in our religious activities, in our good works ? Or are we allowing God to work in us? Are we open to God's will in our lives? Have we really got before us God's purpose for our lives?

And what sort of aspect is there to our portrait? Is it light and powerful, where the colours are bright and bold as we shine like stars, reflecting the light of the Son, the Son of God. Or is the mood dark and sombre, because we have moved away from the source of light and righteousness and sought to do things away from God and his ways?

What sort of a portrait are we painting right now? We ponder. For this picture is going to be placed in the heavenly gallery, and it will take the rest of our life time to complete. We look back at Paul's portraits for ideas, for something to hang on to. Then we begin. We are filled with fear. We start to tremble. But we ask God to work within us to bring about his will and his good purpose for our lives.

So friends, let's start painting...